

A blessing for humanity

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Comment

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Last week, Muslims the world over remembered the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a sign of respect for a person who has shaped much of the history of the world.

Authors such as Michael Hart regarded him as exemplary for this reason. Hart listed the prophet in his book entitled *The 100: A Ranking Of The Most Influential Persons In History* (2000). The prophet is among the 11 religious leaders chosen, apart from scientists and inventors (37), political and military leaders (30), philosophers (14), artistic and literary figures, and explorers.

According to Hart: "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels.

"Muhammad founded and promulgated one of the world's great religions, and became an immensely effective political leader."

Furthermore, "Muhammad (unlike Jesus) was a secular and religious leader."

To the Muslims, Prophet Muhammad's pivotal role in Islam can be seen from the "testimony of faith", or *shahadah*, that believers recite upon embracing the religion. It can be divided into two parts, namely "there is no god but Allah" (*la ilaha illa Allah*), followed by "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah" (*Muhammadan rasul-Allah*).

From the second part of the testimony, Muslims also understand that Prophet Muhammad is the son of Man, and can never be revered as God!

Neither did he have any son who encouraged others to proclaim him to be the next divinely guided leader! In other words, clearly there wasn't any candidate who could claim the prophetic mantle as his legitimate place.

Prophet Muhammad outlived all his daughters except Fatimah, the youngest, who died shortly after he passed away.

The fact that Muhammad refused to appoint a successor and that he had no direct descendent to rise to power automatically upon his death further convince us that he was "the Seal of the Prophets".

He represented the culmination of prophethood after Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus), tracing the lineage back to the patriarch, Ibrahim (Abraham).

The finality of Muhammad's mission also implied the completion of the divine message from Allah to the last prophet.

And that closes the door to other self-declared "prophets" reported in the papers in recent years.

The Quran says: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets. And Allah is ever Knower of all things" (33:40).

While Prophet Muhammad himself does not advocate any form of birthday celebration (neither does Islam), Muslims usually take the chance to remind themselves of what is expected of them given the role model he set.

For example, even before the spread of Islam to the Arabian peninsula, Prophet Muhammad had readily earned respect as *ameen* (the honest one) or *sadiq* (the truthful one), among the pagans.

And this is among the core character traits that underscored the teaching of Islam as it was revealed later.

Traditionally, processions are held to commemorate Prophet Muhammad's birthday in Malaysia. But last week, many were seen distributing flowers and chocolates as they introduced the personality called Prophet Muhammad to them. Some have no inkling of who he is or have misconceptions about him.

Interestingly enough, as much as some would like to read 'Allah' in other scriptures, namely the Bible, Muhammad — according to others — have long been foretold in them.

For example, words such as "Periklytos" and "Paraklytos" are said to refer to "Muhammad" since they mean

"praised" or "celebrated" — similar to the way Muhammad was known even before Islam.

This is eloquently argued by Professor Abdul-Ahad Dawud, formerly Reverend David Benjamin Keldani, Roman Catholic Bishop of Uramiah, in his book *Muhammad in the Bible* (1991). Given that his thorough knowledge covers both the Bible and the Quran makes the proposition an interesting one indeed!

This is made even more interesting since according to the *sirah* (life history) of the Prophet, a Nestorian Christian clergy knew about the coming of Muhammad as a prophet as it was mentioned in the ancient scripture. This was revealed to the prophet's uncle who was on a trading mission to Syria.

The Quran aptly refers to Muhammad as a blessing for humanity and not exclusively for Muslims.

As such the gift of flowers and chocolates by way of introduction to Muhammad to a larger audience is a commendable effort in the attempt to bridge the gap and create better understanding.

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